



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



GOVERNOR NOEM RECOGNIZES TVSO GERI OPSAL

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem delivered her "State of the State" address to lawmakers this week. During her address she noted that South Dakota was ranked the #1 state in America for veterans to live and work.

She also highlighted that South Dakota has expanded the tuition program for veterans to include technical colleges, increased property tax exemptions for veterans who have disabilities, increased the number of beds at the Hot Springs Veterans Home so that we can care for more veterans, and broke ground on the first ever State Veterans Cemetery in Sioux Falls.

Governor Noem recognized Geri Opsal who was awarded the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs Outreach Officer of the Year in 2020.

Geri who served in the United States Air Force from 1983-1987, is currently the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Veterans Service Officer.

Geri not only serves as the SWO TVSO, but she also serves on the Coteau des Prairies Sisseton Hospital Board, South Dakota Native Home Ownership Coalition, VHA/IHS MOU Policy Board of Directors, Sioux Falls VA American Indian Veteran Advocacy Committee, National Office of Tribal Relations Native American Women Veterans Committee, Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Credit Union Board of Directors, Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Veterans Cemetery Board of Directors, and the United Veterans Association War on Drugs.

Geri harnesses the energy and goodwill to take care of our heroes. Her commitment, dedication, drive and passion truly exemplify public service.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Secretary Whitlock Message.....	2
SDNG Promotions	3
SDNG Promotions	4
VA/FITBIT Partnership	5
VA 75th Celebration.....	6
Upcoming Events.....	7



MESSAGE FROM SDDVA SECRETARY WHITLOCK

Caregivers play an important role in the health and well-being of veterans, and their undertakings are often a 24/7 job. We want caregivers for our heroes to know there are improved services and programs to assist them.

Caregivers can be spouses, partners, adult children, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, in-laws, grandchildren, friends, or neighbors. These caregivers are often forced to put their lives on hold to manage their veterans' healthcare needs, and if you asked them, they would tell you that taking care of their hero is one of the greatest honors they have been given.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) expanded the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC). While the specifics can be somewhat complicated, more people who provide critical care to veterans can be eligible for financial and other support through the VA.

The expansion of PCAFC includes eligible veterans that have a single or combined VA service-connected disability rating of 70 percent or higher, regardless of whether it resulted from an injury, illness, or disease. This is a notable change to the definition of serious injury from past regulations and addresses the complexity and expense of keeping veterans at home with their families who provide personalized care.

The expansion of PCAFC will occur in two phases. The first phase has begun and will include eligible veterans who incurred or aggravated a serious injury in the line of duty in the active, military, naval, or air service on or before May 7, 1975. Phase two will go into effect in approximately two years and will include eligible veterans of all eras.

Additionally, the new program changes the stipend payment system, defines new procedures for revocation and discharge, and improves communication between the VA and the caregivers.

All veteran caregivers are encouraged to visit with their local county or tribal veterans service officer about these changes afforded by the PCAFC.

Caregivers can also contact their respective VA Medical Center (Sioux Falls 605-336-3230 – ext. 5080), or (Hot Springs – 605-347-7000 – ext. 17071), or visit: <https://www.va.gov/family-member-benefits/comprehensive-assistance-for-family-caregivers/>.



PARDY PROMOTED TO SDNG BRIGADIER GENERAL

Patrick Pardy of Howard was promoted to the rank of brigadier general in the South Dakota Army National Guard during a ceremony at Camp Rapid, Jan. 9. Pardy will serve as the land component commander for Joint Force Headquarters in Rapid City.

"Being promoted to brigadier general is the single greatest honor of my military career and it is the culmination of all the great work done by the leaders, peers and soldiers I have been lucky enough to work with - all of whom I will be eternally grateful to," Pardy said. "I am also the recipient of the love and support of an amazing family, which was the number one factor to my making it to this point in my career. Finally, I must thank Maj. Gen. Jeff Marlette for the confidence he has shown in me with this selection."

In this position, Pardy will serve as the Golden Coyote training exercise commander, responsible for planning, coordination, resourcing and execution of the exercise. His assignment also includes serving as the deputy director of the SDNG joint staff; and he will serve as the joint task force commander when activated in times of emergency - ensuring planning and execution for assigned missions.

Pardy has over 34 years of military service, first enlisting in the SDNG in 1986 as a combat engineer. In 1992, he received his commission as an engineer officer through the University of South Dakota ROTC program.

During his career, Pardy served in a variety of command and staff positions, such as engineer platoon leader and intelligence officer and operations officer positions at the battalion, brigade and state levels. His command assignments include Company B, 153rd Engineer Battalion, 153rd Engineer Battalion, and 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade.



Pardy has also served on multiple combat deployments - deploying twice to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Pardy holds a Bachelor of Science degree and Juris Doctorate degree from the University of South Dakota, and a master's degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College.

In his civilian career, Pardy serves as a circuit judge in South Dakota's Third Judicial Circuit in Madison.

VANDERWOLDE PROMOTED TO BRIGADIER GENERAL IN SDNG

The South Dakota National Guard promoted Edwin VanDerWolde to the rank of brigadier general during a ceremony at Joe Foss Field in Sioux Falls, Jan. 9.

VanDerWolde serves as the director of the joint staff and is the principal advisor to the SDNG Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Jeff Marlette on all joint issues and policies relating to the defense support to civil authorities and homeland defense programs. He also oversees joint strategic planning and training to enhance the readiness of the Army and Air Guard.

VanDerWolde replaces Brig. Gen. Marshall Michels who retired after 37 years of military service.

"I am truly humbled for this great privilege to serve as director of joint staff for the greatest airmen and soldiers in the nation," VanDerWolde said. "There is a lot of work ahead of us in the next few years, but I know the men and women of the South Dakota National Guard are trained and ready for the challenges."

VanDerWolde's service in the military spans more than 37 years, where he first enlisted into the South Dakota Air National Guard as a supply training specialist in 1983. He received his Baccalaureate Degree in Business Administration from Sioux Falls College in 1991. In 1997, he received his commission as a second lieutenant through the Academy of Military Science in Knoxville, Tennessee.

During his career, VanDerWolde has held a variety of command positions, which include 114th Fighter Wing vice commander, 114th Mission Support Group commander, deputy commander of the 114th Maintenance Group, and commander of the 114th Logistics Readiness Squadron.

In 2008, VanDerWolde deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



VA/FITBIT HELP SUPPORT VETERAN HEALTH AND WELLNESS DURING COVID-19

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a new initiative with Fitbit that will provide eligible veterans, caregivers and VA staff with access to Fitbit programs and services to help manage stress, improve sleep and increase physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The initiative will be focused on participants who currently use Fitbit devices.

VA has contracted with Fitbit to initially provide 10,000 eligible veterans, caregivers, and VA staff a one-year free membership to Fitbit Premium. This includes access to guided programs, hundreds of workouts, mindfulness content, a wellness report, and a health metrics dashboard. Participants will also have access to Fitbit Health Coaching, one-on-one coaching and guidance from a certified health coach or licensed health professional.

Eligibility will be based on various factors such as whether an individual is a veteran, already a Fitbit user and their location. Additionally, some veterans who currently receive VA health care may be eligible to receive a Fitbit Sense, Fitbit's most advanced health smartwatch.

"This initiative is an example of the way VA is successfully adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "It also ensures the department continues to provide efficient, quality and timely care."

VA is also working with veteran service organizations and community-based organizations to explore how wearables and other digital health technologies can help veterans and VA health care teams meet their health care needs.

As VA and Fitbit assess the feedback from the program and the outreach efforts, they will consider new ways to help support the health and wellbeing of veterans. To learn more about the initiative and eligibility, visit [Fitbit Health Solutions](#).



VA CELEBRATES 75 YEARS OF THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

This year, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) commemorates 75 years of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Originally established in 1946 as the Department of Medicine & Surgery to care for veterans returning from World War II, VHA has evolved to meet the unique challenges and care needs of veterans from every era and at every stage of their lives.

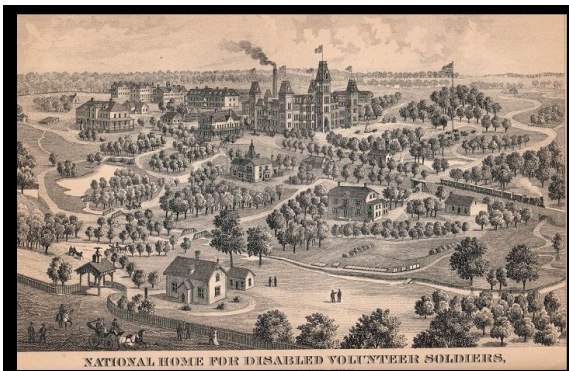
“As we celebrate this historic milestone, we are presented with an opportunity to share VHA’s rich history while looking toward our next chapter as a learning organization that is committed to continuous improvement,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “It is also a fitting occasion to recognize the extraordinary efforts of VHA staff and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is just the latest example of VHA’s long-standing commitment to providing care to veterans whenever and however they need it.”

Over the past 75 years, VHA has made vast and wide-reaching contributions to improve the health of veterans and the entire nation by providing services and technologies that have changed the way health care providers across the country practice medicine:

- Almost 70% of the country’s health care providers receive medical training at a VHA facility. The skills and knowledge they learn from VHA are implemented in hospitals and clinics across the country.
- VHA performed the first successful liver transplant, developed the nicotine patch and Hepatitis C medication, invented the first cardiac pacemaker, and paved the way in the field of pain management.
- VHA leads the nation in telehealth services, with over 900,000 veterans using these services in FY19, and increasing telehealth by 1,180% during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- More than 60% of VA researchers also provide direct patient care. Their work has resulted in three Nobel prizes, seven Lasker awards, and numerous other national and international honors. VA currently has more than 7,000 active research projects focused on improving the lives of veterans.

To celebrate throughout this year, the VA is hosting various events and campaigns to highlight VHA’s long-standing commitment to putting veterans at the center of the care experience, its world-class, mission-driven health care professionals, and its contributions to medical science.

Learn more information about [VHA’s 75th anniversary](#).



UPCOMING EVENTS

Jan 18—State Offices will be closed

Feb 15—State Offices will be closed

Feb 19-21—American Legion Mid-Winter Conference—Oacoma

Apr 9-10—DAV State Convention—Rushmore Hotel and Suites—Rapid City

Aug 16-19—SDDVA Annual Benefits School—Ramkota Hotel—Pierre

Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer

South Dakota Department of the Military <https://military.sd.gov/>

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov>

Soldiers and Sailors Building - 425 E Capitol Avenue

Pierre, SD 57501

Phone: 605-773-8242

E-mail address: audry.ricketts@state.sd.us

